Politics of Territoriality in Ethiopia: the Case of the Pastoral Gabra of Southern Ethiopia

Fekadu Adugna[1]

Abstract

The paper examines the current explosion of identity politics in Ethiopia and its entanglement with territoriality. It explains how neighboring groups negotiate, contest, re/construct and deconstruct their politico-territorial positions. It focuses on the processes by which the rules of political participation produce and reinforce ethno-territoriality, and examines the interplay between ethnic identity politics, territoriality and pastoral livelihood. Taking the case of the pastoral Gabra and their relationship with their neighbors, the Borana in Southern Ethiopia, I argue that the rule of political participation, whether it is practical or mere elite aspiration, has created a new form of territoriality that has altered the long-standing local inter-group relationships and negatively affected the local livelihoods.

Key words: *Borana, Gabra, identity politics, pastoralism, territoriality*

[1] Assistant Professor of Social Anthropology, Department of Social Anthropology, Addis Ababa University. The data used for this article was collected with the financial support from Max-Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Germany.

Political Structure and Policies in the Post-1991 Ethiopia

In 1991 a regime that had ruled Ethiopia for 17 years was defeated by ethnic based insurgents; among others, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Upon gaining power, EPRDF's program evolved into a Provisional Charter – the document by which the country was ruled between 1991 and 1995. The Charter secured support from numerous ethnic based political parties, among whom the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) is considered a co-author of the Charter. In 1994 the Provisional Charter evolved into the constitution of the country (Young 1998; Abbink 1997). The constitution has reorganized the country into nine putatively autonomous ethnic-based regional states and two city states. Six of the regional states: Afar, Amhara, Harari, Oromia, Somali and Tigray are considered 'mother' states of the people after which they are named. The remaining three regional states: the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State (SNNPRS), the Gambela and Benishangul-Gumuz regional states are known as multi-ethnic states, despite the fact that they also are ethnically organized at their sub-state levels. Depending on the size of their population, ethnic groups are given regional, zonal or district statuses. The constitution, further, states that 'Every nation, nationality and people in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession' (Article 39 (1))[2].

The new constitution and the administrative structure it instituted have set in motion two interrelated issues having academic and political values. First, the constitution defined ethnic groups, except for one point, namely 'belief in a common or related identities', by their 'objective' criteria. Second, the constitution has basically changed the approach to nationhood from the Ethiopian state point of view. Previously, Ethiopian regimes had always been discouraging any reference to ethnic and linguistic issues.[3] They always liked to portray Ethiopia as a supra-ethnic nation. The provincial divisions had followed lines of communications, and systematically designed to cross-cut ethnic divisions. To the contrary, the

[2] The terms 'nation', 'nationality' and 'people' are still pretty vague (as evidenced by the name of SNNPRS) their usage are the same to ethnic group.

[3] This is notwithstanding the derg's, incorporation of 'nations and nationalities' into the national discourse.

new system unequivocally recognized Ethiopia's cultural diversity as a composite of 'nations and nationalities'. Indeed, the constitution has been noted as unprecedented in giving the 'nations and nationalities' the right to 'self-determination' up to cessation (Baylis 2004; Aalen 2006; Young 1996).

EPRDF, the architect of the system, justifies the necessity of decentralizing power along ethnic lines as an adequate response to past centralism and the Amhara ethnocratic dominance of the Ethiopian state (Aalen 2006). Previously, as was commented by Markakis (1974), when the Amhara were perceived to be the ruling group, adoption of Orthodox Christianity and the Amharic language were the only way to gain political power or to be employed in the state administration (cited in Aalen 2006: 246). The decentralization is, thus, a means to correct the legacy of ethnic domination and marginalization in the history of the Ethiopian state and the need for reconstruction of the state (Aalen 2006: 245). Hence, by giving each ethnic group a distinct administration, the EPRDF government claims to defuse ethnic tensions and longstanding ethnic conflicts. In this view, ethnic politics is considered an 'emancipatory politics'.

Critics, however, have pointed out that 'ethnic federalism is a mere sham to disguise the hegemony of a single ethnic group' (Baylis 2004: 559). According to this view, by transforming the country into ethnically defined regional states and creating ethnically defined parties under its control, the leadership from the ethnic minority of Tigray, a dominant force in EPRDF, is able to better command the whole country (Merera, 2005; Aalen 2006; Tronvoll 2003; Pausewang et al. 2002; Turton 2006; Aalen and Tronvoll 2009).

Others have pointed out that the ethnic tension the government was meant to diffuse has continued, and in some cases have even been aggravated (Hussein, 2002; Fekadu 2009; Bassi 2010). Either by de fault or design the new conflicts are mostly at the periphery – between the new ethno-national states and within the states. As this paper also shows, some of the contestations and competitions over resources are at a district levels or even below that.

Notwithstanding the alleged hegemonic control of the EPRDF from the centre, the new political structure has 're-mapped' Ethiopia after more than one century of unitary state organization (James et al 2002; Schlee 2003).

The major ethnic groups, as mentioned above, have become ethno-national regional states. Others are given zone (province) or district statuses. This has reshaped the peoples' imagination about the country. Every ethnic group tends to emphasize on its own ethno-regional administration. This has encouraged 'the further strengthening of ethnicity as a political identity…' (Abbink 1997: 173) and played a significant role in solidifying ethnic boundaries and in consolidating ethno-territoriality, as well as, in extreme cases, even in producing new ethnic groups. These have been manifested mainly in the contestations and negotiations over ethnic identity and ethnic territory.

Institutionalization of Negotiations over Identity

The Ethiopian constitution has put in place a system for scrutinizing and officially recognizing ethnic identities and negotiations when disputes and contestations over identity arise. The examination of ethnic identity and disputes over territory is the responsibility of the second chamber of the parliament known as the House of Federation. It is 'the highest political authority on the questions of nationality' (Negarit Gazeta 2001:1610).[4] The first chamber, the House of People's Representatives, has legislative power, and its members are elected directly from districts within each regional state. In contrast, the House of Federation is composed of the representatives of each of the ethnic groups who are assigned by the member states. The House of Federation officially represents the 'Nations, Nationalities and People' of Ethiopia. All recognized ethnic groups have at least one representative, which increases according to population size (one more representative for each million member of an ethnic group).

In 2001 the House of Federation established an office known as the Constitutional and Regional Affairs. The main duty of this office is to coordinate and investigate issues related to ethnic identity and disputes over ethno-national territory. The office has 15 members drawn from the regional states' presidents and members of the House of Federation. It is a forum for the people who claim their identity is either not recognized or

[4] Negarit Gazeta is an official gazette of the Ethiopian Government.

who have other related problems.[5] Procedurally, 'Any nation , nationality or people who believe that their self identities are denied, its right of self-administration is infringed, promotion of its culture, language and history are not respected …may present its application to the House through the proper channel' (Negarit Gazeta 2001:1610).

Such state policies and constitutional provisions have a significant effect on the sort of identity politics and territoriality I am examining in this paper. Making ethnicity an organizing principle of the state at all levels of the state structures, the regime intertwined identity and resources. An ethnic group recognized by the state gets an administrative status that brings resources from the state. As administrative units are equated with ethnic groups or even clans (as it is the case in the Somali National Regional State), negotiation for resources, state and pastoral, has become group-based. Individual actors negotiate on behalf of a certain ethnic group or clans. This has created ethnic identity entrepreneurs who negotiate, file appeals and litigate for identity and associated territory for a given group in relevant offices of the regional and federal states. This made ethnic identity more important than ever before.

As a result, claims to become ethnic groups with their own ethnic territory have been continuously emerging since the implementation of the ethnic based federal state policy. In 2001 the Siltie community, which had been regarded as one of the clans of the Gurage, voted on their ethnicity (Smith 2007) and transformed themselves from a clan to a distinct ethnic group. This entails, among others, an administrative unit that would permit access to state resources. Many groups have applied for recognition following the Silte's model. Some have already secured the recognition, and many more are on the waiting list. Between 1995 and 2000 the number of officially recognized ethnic groups, who have representatives in the House of Federation, was fifty-eight. From 2001 to 2010 this figure reached seventy-five. [6] Only in 2007 and 2008 four and five ethnic groups

[5] Interview with Ato Daniel, Secretary of the Constitutional and Regional Affairs, 04.01.2007, Addis Ababa.
[6] Interview with an official of the House of Federation, 01.02.08, Addis Ababa.

respectively were recognized by the House of Federation.[7] One more is added in 2015[8]. After more than two decades of ethnic federalism, Ethiopia is still experimenting ethnic identity politics.

Next, I will discuss identity politics and territoriality at a local level by taking the case of the pastoral Gabra and their relation with their neighbors, the Borana, in Southern Ethiopia. This article is a result of my over one decade engagement in research among the pastoral Oromo and Somali of Southern Ethiopia. Most of the data were collected between 2006 and 2007 during fieldwork for my PhD dissertation. Methodologically, it attempts to re/construct how the macro-political processes are appropriated and used by different actors at the local level. The data were collected using an amalgam of several qualitative data collection instruments such as informal discussions, attending public meetings, focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews.

The Gabra's Contested Identity

The Gabra are Oromo-speaking camel pastoralists inhabiting Southern Ethiopia and Northern Kenya. A few Gabra inhabiting Southern Ethiopia also speak Somali. The Gabra in southern Ethiopia and in northern Kenya are called Gabra Miigo and Gabra Malbe respectively. Both of them claim common origin. The Gabra in Ethiopia, with whom this paper is concerned, currently inhabit the Borana and Guji zones of Oromia National Regional State (hereafter, Oromia NRS) and the Liban zone of the Somali National Regional State (hereafter, Somali NRS). The majority of them are sparsely distributed among the Borana Oromo.

[7] *Addis Admass*, a weekly News Paper, www.Addisadmas.com, accessed on 23.o5.2009. According to interview with an official from the Constitutional and Regional Affairs, four groups were waiting for recognition in 2008. These were, (1) the Wolene (known as one of the Gurage clans) demanded separation from the Gurage; (2) the Manjo (a cast group among the Shakicho) demanded separation from Shakicho; the Dube (a group who claim a Bantu origin among the Somali) requested to be separated from the Somali, and (4) the Darawa demanded a change from the Somali to the Oromo (Interview on 04.01.2008, Addis Ababa)

[8] Qimant was declared as an ethnic group on 13 March 2015.

The ethnic identity of the Gabra has been a matter of academic debate for decades (See Schlee 1989, 2008; Megerssa and Kassam 1994; Kassam 2006). Schlee (1989) argues that the Gabra were originally Somaloid or part of what he called a 'Proto Rendile Somali' (PRS) society that had been in control of southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya before the expansion of Oromo population in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. According to Schlee, the Gabra adopted the Oromo language keeping at the same time some of their earlier cultural markers such as 'camel culture', housing style and calendar (see also Schlee 2008a, b). On the contrary, Kassam and Megerssa (1994) argue that the Gabra were originally Oromo and adopted some of the Somali material and ritual cultures as they were marginalized due to their ritually junior position vis-à-vis the Borana. In her recent article Kassam (2006) presented the ethno-genesis of the Gabra as 'a 'composite' society which is made up of segments that originate from many of the communities that inhabit the Lake Turkana (formerly Lake Rudolf) and beyond it […]' (2006: 173).

Most other ethnographers on the Gabra (see for example, Tablino 1999; Soga 2007; Wood, 1999, 2000), and the Gabra oral historians agree that they have a deep-rooted ethno-historical substratum that relates them to both the Oromo and Somali. Their 'camel culture', which manifests itself in their everyday life and rituals; their cross-cutting ties with the Garri Somali clans, and their calendar make the Gabra consider themselves closer to the Somali than the Oromo. On the other hand, other variables such as their language (Afaan Oromo); their age and generation set, and the territory where they predominantly live, which is the base of their subsistence, make them part of the Oromo nation rather than the Somali.

Recently, in the situation of intensified identity politics, their identity has become a contested subject among the Gabra themselves. This has been further complicated by the fact that the Moyale district, where the majority of the Gabra live, is contested between the Oromia and the Somali national regional states. The Gabra are represented both in the Oromo and Somali. The Gabra elite who secured job in Oromia have claimed Oromoness and those who have got job in the Somali national regional state claimed Somaliness (Fekadu 2009, 2010). In the following section, I will discuss the traditional Gabra-Borana interactions around pastoral resource use to provide the readers with some livelihood information as a background

against which the present theme – politics of territoriality among the pastoral Gabra – is discussed.

Accommodative Pastoral Resource Use

A long-standing Borana-Gabra relation around pastoral resource use had been accommodative. This was enabled by a socio-culturally oriented ritual based co-existence and a compartmentalization of resource use. Let me discuss each of them in brief.

Ritual Interdependence and Resource Use

Both the Borana and Gabra have an interdependent generation set system popularly known as the gada system, which depends on the ritualized gift exchanges they make to initiate ritual performances (Fekadu 2009; Schlee 1989 and 1998; Kassam 2006). Such a relationship between the Borana *gada* and the Gabra *gada* had enhanced a peaceful co-existence and a smooth sharing of resources, especially water. The Borana and Gabra pastoralists depend on a few water wells; some of which were dug centuries ago. Both groups consider well sites as sacred. Peace, respect and truth, as ideals for smooth sharing of the water, are considered important for the wellbeing of the wells (See also Adano and Witseburg 2008). People are careful not to 'disrespect' the well site. Consequently, dispute between the two groups over water use had been quite rare. The Borana, who have had managed the watering schedule, have always venerated the Gabra ritual leaders' role in blessing these wells. This has been manifested in a ritual performed by a Gabra qallu every year at one of the well sites named Eel Golota. The qallu kills a ram (an uncastrated sheep) and puts its tail in the well. The ram is known as *korma cinii* (tick ram). Performing the *korma cinii* ritual is believed to protect livestock from being infested by ticks and secures the general health and fertility of the livestock. Otherwise, according to the Borana elders "even if grass and water are plenty they could not put on weight and prosper".[9]

These have had enabled the Gabra and the Borana to co-exist. In the context of the pastoral livelihood, even though they have had no control

[9] Interview with Borbor Bule, Yabello, 07.07.06; with Kanu Jilo, Yabello, 23.10.06.

over any of the water points, their ritual power made the Gabra an important neighbour to the livelihood of the Borana[10].

Spatial Compartmentalization and Resource Use

The longstanding peaceful sharing of resources between the Borana and Gabra could also be explained by the different niches they have historically exploited. [11] The two groups avoided competition by emphasizing exploitation of different niches (Schlee 1989: 39, 51; Soga 2007). Even though the Borana and Gabra claim common territory, there is no village which they shared. They established their villages based on their ecological preferences. The Borana livelihood is based on cattle husbandry, while the Gabra are mostly dependent on camel herding.[12] Cattle must be watered every three days as compared to the camels that need watering every 10-15 days.

Therefore, the Borana cattle usually graze within 15-25 kilometers radius from a given well source. This has necessitated the Borana to settle down in the villages mostly within 16 kilometers radius from the wells, which allow the cattle to commute between their villages and the wells in one day. Even when movements are necessary due to long dry season, the villagers tend to return to the same site when the situations improve. On the other hand, the Gabra camel herders exploit wider areas, including those where water sources are remote, without developing a strict control over a defined territory and water points. Camels also browse bushy and shrubby areas while cattle need herbaceous pasture. Thus, while the Borana use the highland, the camel herding Gabra frequently use the marginal lowlands in the same general territory.

[10] Since the well-being of these wells requires the cooperation of all the users, the neighbours of the Borana who share the wells participate not only in ritual performance but also in the maintenance of the wells. They also cooperate in providing labour in case of watering livestock, which is a very painstaking work (Soga 2007).

[11] A niche is 'the place of a group in the total environment, its relation to resources and competitors' (Barth 1956: 1079; see also Barth 1969a: 19).

[12] According to a survey conducted in the 1980s, more than 90% of Borana family's cash income is derived from livestock and nearly all from cattle (Coussins and Upton 1987:211).

This occupation of different ecological niches in the pastoral environment helped the two groups to minimize competition over the resources. It was also ecologically, economically and socially adaptive. However, with changes in the political landscape, in the context of currently intensified identity politics and associated ethno-territoriality, the Gabra elite complain that the Gabra are victims of their past livelihood strategy. The Gabra thus began to question the soundness of their livelihood strategy and perhaps of their mode of relationship with their former compatriots-the Borana as have been elaborated in the following discussions.

Nomadic Pastoralist Gabra and Ethno-territoriality

The focus of this section is on how the policies of the state have been appropriated, negotiated and used by the local individuals and collectivities representing the Gabra. In the post-1991 context, the Gabra found themselves in an awkward situation vis-à-vis their neighbors. That is, in a sharp contrast with their neighbors: they don't have a territory they can call 'their own'. The new generation regrets that their ancestors failed in the past to occupy a defined territory. The following statement is what a Gabra elite regretfully told me in 2007 in Moyale, "The Gabra had been number one in camel wealth in this region. Our fathers have been following after the tail of large herd of camels, they had never settled down. You see how much that affected us today".[13] This was particularly relevant in the post-1991 socio-political situation when the Gabra's neighbors scramble for territory that suddenly placed the Gabra in an inconvenient position as the following quote clearly shows:

> The Guji have their own land; the Borana have their own land; the Garri have their own land; the Konso have their own land; the Burji have their own land. Malbe have their own land. Gabra have no land. People who do not have land, who do not have *kebele*[14] and *woreda* [district] are

[13] Interview with Huqa Abdi, 13.06.2006, Moyale

[14] Territorial units of the lowest level of administration

> people no more. Borana simply say "this land belongs to the Gabra and the Borana", but they do not want to give us even a single k*ebel*e.[15]

This informant clearly expressed not only the importance of having one's own ethnic territory but also the relationship between the state's group-based allocations of administrative unit, which is associated with a specific territory. In other words, it shows the present reality of the association between identity politics and territoriality in Ethiopia. The informant was a pastoralist without any formal education, and just spoke his mind from his experience of the neighbors of the Gabra who have some form of administrative unit under their control. What is interesting is that his idea resonates with the constitution of the country, which the informant had never read. According to the constitution, to be an ethnic group or as the constitution refers to it, 'nation, nationality and people' territory is an essential element. [16] With the implementation of ethno-national administration, the perception and importance of territory has been changed among the local pastoralists.

Pastoralists used to emphasize on what the territory has (pasture and water) and access to them rather than on 'the ownership' of the territory itself. This had been the case especially for numerical minority groups such as the Gabra. Truly, territory has never been perceived as important as this time in the history of the Gabra. Their relative small size and their nomadic pastoralism did not allow them or did not necessitate occupation of territory[17]. They had been using water and pasture with their neighbors (wherever they migrate) based on traditional resource regime. Now, territory becomes more than pasture and water. It is about politics of identity and associated state-based resources. As a result, the discourse

[15] Interview with Sharamo Jiloo Abdii, 07.06.2006, Moyale

[16] Article 39 of the constitution reads that "A "Nation, Nationality or People" for the purpose of this constitution, is a group of people who have or share a large measure of a common culture or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in common or related identities, a common psychological makeup, and who inhabit an identifiable, predominantly contiguous territory" (FDRE, Article 39 (5)).

[17] The Gabra elites claim that their number is more than forty thousand in Ethiopia. However, the Gabra as a category are not registered in the population census of Ethiopia (Fekadu, 2009).

about the importance of 'one's own land' or 'one's own district' has become common among the Gabra. Elders ask saying, 'where is the Gabra's land?' Students question the relevance of attending school where they do not have district of their own, because from the elite's perspective, ethno-territorial administration is also a means of accessing job opportunity for their respective group members.

In addition to ethno-territorial politics, there are underlying economic, social and livelihood transformations. These include decline in the number of livestock an individual possesses, an increasing reliance on relief food, and expansion of social service infrastructure (e.g., education and health centers). These factors have encouraged the nomadic Gabra to settle down, which enhanced the mushrooming of big villages.[18]

Coupled with federal administrative structure, there has been a process of devolution of state resources to district level. The regional states allocate the bulk of the budget they receive from the federal state to the districts. Since 2001 Oromia NRS has been allocating block grants to the districts. According to this new scheme, the districts receive money with only general provision as to the way it is to be spent. Thus, those who control a district control the resources, which means, a recognized ethnic group with an administrative unit gets a greater resource share than an unrecognized group of equal size (see also Baylis 2004; Hagmann and Mulugeta 2008). This, obviously, has increased the enthusiasm of ethnic elites to have a district status. Therefore, when the Gabra think of territory in the present context, their concerns are not only about pastoral resources; but also they are about state resources. The state resource is very broad. For the business men the state resource is about opening business opportunities including getting access to state sponsored contracts, less tightened check points to smuggle goods and negotiate over duty and tax. They get contracts of diverse kind – building schools, clinics, offices, and transporting relief foods. For the elites state resource is about state budget, which they exclusively control. They favor those who are related to them in accessing

[18] The Gabra villages such as Guchi, Laga Sure and Galab have thousands of inhabitants. In 2004, in the Gabra inhabited *kebele* of Laga Sure 17% of the school age boys and girls (6-17) were attending school (A survey report by LVIA (Lay Volunteers International Association) an International NGO).

job opportunities and relief food allocations. These broaden the bases of the actors who could engage in the game.

Thus, the main aspiration of the Gabra elite is to become a 'nation', followed by a territory on which they exercise administrative authority, which in turn comes with the share of the resource pie. It is an aspiration to achieve a local level statehood, i.e., nationalism writ small.

Referring to similar developments in other parts of Ethiopia would add a broader picture to my arguments. Interesting analogies with the Gabra are the cases of the Sheekash in the Somali NRS and the Majangir in the Gambella Region. The Gabra, Shekaash and Majangir have similarities in their relationship with territory; their livelihood strategies; relation with their neighbors (ritual or political); their demographic features and above all in the strategies they used in the recent endeavors to seek for territory.[19] The Sheekash is a small Somali clan that inhabits Afdeer Zone of the Somali NRS. As a small clan, the Sheekash did not have a distinct territory of their own in the past; rather they were allied to bigger clans particularly the Ogaaden 'whom they accompanied as religious scholars and Qur'an teachers' (Hagmann 2007: 215). With the establishment of the Somali NRS under ethnic federalism, and the allocation of zones and districts to major clans, the Sheekash found themselves in a disadvantaged position since they lacked their own distinct territory. As a UN OCHA field staff noted,

> The Sheikash who never had and never claimed a place of origin [distinct territory], realized that their clan was being threatened by the new political developments. (…) With the regionalization process taking place along ethnic [or clan] boundaries, it became more and more difficult for Sheikash to get employment opportunities in most of the Somali Region' (Guinard 2001b cited by Hagmann. 2007: 215).

In the course of bloody confrontations with different Ogaaden lineages the Sheekash managed to establish a clan territory in West Imi's Raaso area in 2001, at least as a base from where to fight the rest (ibid.). The conflict has

[19] The Majangir case is different among the three in that they are demographically dominated by land hungry recent migrants from highland Ethiopia while the other two are already minorities in comparison to the people among whom they have lived for centuries.

continued. The Sheekash have been favored by the EPRDF, the ruling party; since they allied in the war against Ogaaden National Liberation Front (Schlee 2006: 6).

Sarah Voughan (2003) wrote a similar account about the Majangir of Western Ethiopia, and the problem they faced to become an ethnic group and successfully compete for the resource of the state in the ethnic based federalism. According to Voughan, the Majangir are 'relatively late entrants in the competitive process of territorially defining one's homelands, initially disadvantaged by a traditional culture premised on fluid group relations with land' (2003: 273). The Manjangir practiced shifting cultivation. In an attempt to catch up with their neighbors, the Majangir utilized a violent method in the post 1991 period (ibid). Similar to the Majangir and the Sheekash cases succinctly explained by Voughan and Hagmann, territory is a 'missing component' in the Gabra's endeavor to become a distinct group and share from the benefit such a group would get from the state.

Gabra's Request for 'Special District'

The Gabra's rhetoric of territoriality has come to a concrete political demand when they posed a request for a 'special district' status in 2006. This is in line with Constitutional provision that, 'a distinct group' can demand for 'self-administration', the smallest of which is a 'special district' (FDRE, 1995). A 'Special district' is an administrative unit that is granted usually to minorities who occupy a distinct territory within a given regional state that is dominated by one or more major ethnic groups. A special district is not accountable to the zonal administration within which it is located. Rather it is directly accountable to the regional state, which makes it administratively parallel to the zone where it is situated.[20]

The phrase 'distinct group', on the premise of which that the Gabra were seeking for special administration status, is marked by a common history, language, culture, and territory. However, the Gabra, although they could claim a pan Gabra history and culture, neither have a distinct language nor speak a distinct language of their own. They speak either

[20] Administrative hierarchy in Ethiopia is as follows, in a descending order: The Federal state – the national regional states – zones – districts– kebele.

Oromo or Somali or both languages. They also are not in control of a significant territory. In addition to these missing objective markers, the Gabra were also aware of their limitations (e.g., demographic, economical and political) to be able to engage in territorial contention with the Oromo and Somali and demand for their own administration as distinct from both. Thus, the Gabra's aspiration/option to seek for a special administration – a 'Gabra special district' – within the Oromia NRS where the majority of them live could only be understood in the context of these limitations and missing markers of a ' distinct group'.

Yet, even by claiming for a 'Special district' status, the Gabra elite are still technically alluding to a demand for recognition of minority status within Oromia NRS. But they refrain from explicitly expressing their demand in such a tone since it is tantamount to declaring that they are not Oromo, which in turn could endanger their livelihood and security at the local level and their relation with Oromia at regional state level. It is amid these complex and delicate socio-political, economic and ecological relations that the Gabra elite articulate their demands for 'special administration' in the context of 'a local problem', often contrasting themselves with the Borana, related to good governance and fair access to resources.

Accordingly, the Gabra applied for *'Aanaa addaa'* ('special district') within Oromia NRS in early 2006. In July and August of the same year, the Gabra elders met with the then president of Oromia NRS in Yabelo (capital of Borana zone) and in Addis Ababa respectively, in order to discuss on their demand. A three-person team consisting of two Gabra and one Borana, all of them government officials was established and entrusted with the task of identifying and proposing a specific territory where the 'Special district' of the Gabra would be established.

I have been following the Gabra's 'Question' since the summer of 2006. So far, the team established to come up with a proposal could not suggest a certain territory for the establishment of the imagined 'Special district' of the Gabra. Given the relative small size of the Gabra in each of the existing districts as compared to the Borana, the absence of a specific territory previously owned by the Gabra, and Gabra's lack of 'ownership' right to any of the water points, the team could hardly propose a territory for Gabra's 'special district'. In the meantime, tensions were rising between

the Borana and Gabra. Despite the Gabra elites' calculated move to reduce some of the negative consequences of their demand for special district as discussed above, Gabra's a demand for territory alone was sufficient enough to trigger violent conflicts between the Borana and Gabra several times**.** Already intensified identity politics and the suspicion it has created exacerbated these conflicts.

Battling for Kebele: the Case of Guchi

In the meantime, the Gabra were busy re/constructing their territory by settling down in permanent villages – settlement in search of recognition. After settling down, they usually claim *kebele* status for their villages. Currently, there are four *kebele* exclusively inhabited by the Gabra in the Moyale district of Oromia NRS (two of them in Moyale town and two other are pastoral *kebele*). They also have got one *kebele* in the Moyale district of the Somali NRS. They have secured all of them since 1995, the year the new constitution was endorsed. A *Kebele*, as a territorial unit of the lowest level of administration, is too small to have a budget. It has very little job opportunity. Only two persons (the chairman and the secretary) are paid in a *kebele* administrative structure. The hope of the Gabra is to multiply the number of the *kebele* and eventually form a district that has a resource, i.e. a full administrative structure with state allocated budget and job opportunities. According to Hagmann (2007), in quite a similar manner, in the Somali NRS, pastoralists' increasing identification with a given territory in the last 15 years or so was primarily motivated by their 'eagerness to achieve political recognition through land occupancy' (2007: 216).

To further explain the point I am making (identity politics and territoriality), I use a case of the conflict occurred in Guchi, one of the four *kebele* of the Gabra in the Moyale district of Oromia NRS. The kebele is located 37 kilometers east of Moyale town. In 2007 there were 600 households, and all of them were Gabra.[21] The *kebele* has an elementary school and a health center. In the same year, 37% of the community was involved in 'safety net program' (a polite form of food/money for work). They participate in some development activities, (e.g., construction of a

[21] Interview with Adan Wario, chairman of Guchi kebele, 20 August 2007 at Guchi.

pond or a road) for which they would be given food or money. The participants were then dependent directly on the state for their livelihood. The remaining members of the kebele had livestock which graze in far away satellite camps. Though most of them had a plot (*obru*), some of them have fenced it; the continuous failure of rain did not allow them to farm it. The Gabra are in a process of livelihood transformation, which has unintended consequence. They are increasingly loosing their livestock. In an environment where rainfall is not reliable, and there is no irrigation, farming is, obviously, not a dependable alternative. The people have told me repeatedly that such dependence on food from the state in such a huge proportion is unprecedented in their history.[22]

In 2005, the International Committee of the Red-Cross (ICRC) offered a fund and the equipment as well as human resource to dig a borehole in the district of Moyale. A geological survey had been undertaken and Guchi was selected on the basis of the availability of underground water. It was decided that drilling of the borehole would begin in April 2006. However, the Gabra opposed the plan on the ground that the presence of water would invite the Borana to come to the Kebele for the use of the water and gradually outnumber them. Such a scenario obviously was envisaged as a threat to their 'ownership' right over the *kebele and* the new political identity that they are constructing.

[22] This is without considering the two moments when the Gabra were displaced in large numbers: the first one was during the 1970s Ethiopia-Somali wars and the second was in 1992 during a conflict between the Borana on one side and the Gabra and Garri on the other side. In both cases the Gabra took refuge in the neighboring countries (see Basi 1997; Schlee and Shongolo 1995).

Photo by Fekadu Adugna (July 27: 2007)

On 27 July 2007 I attended a one day meeting held at Guchi in which more than 100 elders, officials and pastoralists participated. Officials including the administrator and security heads of the Borana zone, administrators and vice administrators of Moyale and the neighboring districts also participated. Ritual leaders such as the *abba gadaa* of the Borana and the senior *hayyu* of the Gabra also participated.[23] The meeting was presided over by the head of the security and administration office of the Borana Zone. The main agenda of the meeting was the proposed borehole and the resistance it faced from the Gabra. At the beginning, the security head made

[23] While the Borana call the head of their gada system abba gadaa, the Gabra call their own hayyu.

a speech, which was reconciliatory in its content and was meant to persuade the Gabra to accept the borehole project. He explained the need for water from the 'state's development agenda' perspective. Then, the Gabra presented why they opposed the digging of the borehole, followed by the Borana's presentation supporting the digging of the borehole. Let me present their exchanges: Tache (Gabra):

> We opposed the digging of this borehole for two reasons. First, it contradicts the establishment of *kebele*. In principle, a *kebele* cannot be established over the already existing one. Second, it damages pastoral life. Though not sufficient for the *ardha*,[24] Guchi has a borehole. Digging another borehole is harmful. The pasture is not sufficient to accommodate if more livestock would come. Therefore, we do not want this borehole to be dug here.

Another Gabra followed:

We the Gabra have no land. So far we got only these few *kebele*. Borana have a big zone and many districts. Please do not be harsh on us for these few *kebeles* . . .

The Borana *abba gadaa* responded:

> This land belongs to the Gabra and the Borana. The Gabra and the Borana do not have separate pasture and water. We have been using everything together. There is no border between us. If we get water here it belongs to Gabra, it belongs to Borana, a stranger can use it, even wild animals can use it…

Ibren, another Gabra took the turn:

> Please, this issue is not about pasture and water, unlike the previous time. Discuss this issue in a proper context. It is about territory. The Borana want to displace us from this kebele using the digging of the borehole as an excuse…

[24] *Ardha* is a spatial unit in the traditional Borana territorial organization which includes adjacent villages which participate in water and pasture management activities together (Bokku 2002; Hogg 1993).

After a long deliberation which was not always smooth, around 18:00 o'clock a Borana elder proposed to 'let the borehole be dug, and given to the Gabra to manage it, and the Borana be given the right to use'. The Gabra ritual leaders and elders immediately accepted the suggestion by the Borana elder. However, a group of Gabra youth shouted opposing the suggestion and their ritual leaders and elders who accepted it. Subsequently, they walked out of the meeting in protest. The meeting ended without any agreement.

Pastoralists have been widely reported for engaging in conflicts over scarce water and pasture. However, this is a case where people dispute over a territory, even by resisting the drilling of a borehole in an area where water is the scarcest resource. The first speaker in the above exchange clearly stated that the water project would undermine their *kebele*. Controlling a *kebele* is not only a matter of owning a pasture and water resources but also a status associated to a group's political identity that would bring resources from the state. The Borana were on a safe side in the exchange of statements because they were arguing in favor of the digging of the borehole, which the state also supports. They countered the Gabra's exclusionary territorial claim with rhetoric of inclusion. The Borana *abba gadaa's* response that the "…land belongs to the Borana and the Gabra…" that the two have everything together is a standard discourse during conflict resolutions. It is an inclusive and reconciliatory statement. Indeed, there is no border between the two groups and they use water and pasture together as long as they abide by the resource management rules. But, the problem was that the issue at hand was beyond the traditional dispute over pasture and water. It is, rather, about territorial occupation. The Gabra youth are frustrated that they might lose the hard won *kebele*.

The next day, I held a discussion with two Gabra men who left the meeting in protest. I asked why they opposed the idea of the digging of the borehole, which was accepted by their ritual leaders and elders. Both had similar view that the dispute is about ownership right over the territory, not a dispute over water. They are very critical of the role of the elders and the ritual leaders. They elaborated that the Gabra elders lacked an understanding of the complex politics surrounding the territorial, power and

resource control issues involved. Let me quote a statement from one of them:

> Allocating land is not a duty of the ritual leaders and elders; they may arbitrate in cases of conflict over water or pasture. What you observed yesterday was not about a single well but about a territory. This could be solved only through the state law in the constitution. Our elders do not know this. They do not know the advantage of *kebele.* That was what drove us crazy yesterday.[25]

The quotation succinctly explains the current dispute between the Borana and Gabra. It is clearly related to the present-day ethno-territorial discourse. For the elite what matters are not only the economic and ecological rationale, but also the politics and the power relations. In other words, the dispute over that territory is simultaneously a struggle over identity and power. The elders and the ritual leaders are accused of lack of the knowledge how this works. In fact, the Gabra elite have been accusing the Gabra ritual leaders of building and maintaining a ritualized 'depoliticized' 'unrealistic' harmonious relationship with their Borana counterparts since the 1970s[26]. Part of the elite even tried to bring the relationship to an end by attacking the institution – the Gabra age and generation set also called the 'Gabra gada' – that make the relationship work[27]. The ritual leaders were physically attacked two times, in 1977 and 2008, and both times the drum, the main ritual symbol of the Gabra gada, was snatched from the ritual leaders and taken away. This disarming of the ritual leaders was aimed at delegitimizing the system[28]. As a result, the Gabra gada vanished two times and revitalized both times to survive to date in the custodianship of elders.

[25]A statement of Tache, from a discussion with Abdi and Tache, 28.July 2006, Moyale.

[26] The 1970s is a turning point in the Gabra-Borana relationship. In the second half of the 1970s, during the Ethio-Somali war, the Gabra supported the invading Somali army while the Borana supported the Ethiopian government.

[27] What I called the 'Gabra gada' to help readers grasp it easily is usually called *dhabela* by the Gabra themselves.

[28] The skin for making the drum is obtained from the Meta lineage of the Matari clan of the Borana. The stick for the drum is ritually cut only from the vicinity of a particular

Furthermore, the inter-generational difference was intensified this time due to the elders and ritual leaders' co-optation by the state. Their activities are sponsored by the local administration that is dominated by the Borana. They get transportation services, per diem and accommodations. For instance, while pastoralist attendants came to the above mentioned meeting on foot, a few selected elders and the ritual leaders were transported by four wheel drive vehicles. They were paid more than the standard per diem and enjoyed a relatively comfortable accommodation in the town. As a result there were complaints from the people that the elders and the ritual leaders were becoming more loyal to the state than to the people they represent. This is isolating them from the people they represent and they are increasingly loosing respect and legitimacy from their own communities.

The dispute over the *kebele* persisted. After the negotiation failed, both sides were looking for an excuse to attack each other. This happened in December 2006. On the 11th of December 2006 the Gabra children tending livestock near the Borana settlement areas were beaten by their Borana counterparts. In a neighboring *kebele* a Gabra man was killed suspected of stealing a Borana man's camel. The next day two Borana (a woman and a man) were killed in a nearby village. On the 12th December of the same year, a fierce fighting took place for one day, and 34 people were killed, including 2 policemen. The issue has never been solved since then. In August 2008 the same issue was raised again and the Borana and Gabra exchanged strong words in a meeting held in Moyale town and in a week time a violent conflict erupted in the same village, 18 people reportedly died.[29] These are not conflicts over scarce pastoral resources, they rather emanated from the workings of the politics of identity and ethno-territoriality at the local level.

Conclusion

In this article, I discussed the "contemporary forms of territorialization", to borrow from Dawson et al (2014:3), in Ethiopia by taking the case of the

Borana well. This shows how much the drum is a symbol of a smooth co-existence between the Gabra and the Borana.

[29] Telephone communication with Abdul Kadir, my field assistant – 16. 08.2008.

Gabra in Southern Ethiopia. It is a case in which a pastoral territory has been politicized through appropriation of national political discourses. Indeed, the notion of territoriality is related to claim to control over territory, which is political (Gertel et al 2014:9). I argued that change in the politico-administrative system in 1991 changed the structural background against which the actors debate entitlement and negotiate boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Traditionally, concept of territory among the pastoral Gabra and Borana was embedded in ritual and ecological perspectives. At present, without subscribing to the contextual difference, emphasis is given to the significance of belonging to a certain territory. This, on the other hand, has fundamentally changed the meaning of resources. As a result, currently, resource is not that much about pasture and water, rather it is about territorial control; that requires creating new borders and new administrative units, which is also about identity.

This has disrupted the longstanding pastoral livelihood strategies. For most, it affected the accommodative and cooperative resource regime. The ritualized mutual inter dependence between the Gabra and the Borana that enhanced smooth relationships for centuries has been pushed aside. Their long-lived socio-politically harmonious and ecologically sound way of life has been transformed into competitive and conflictual as well as ecologically incompatible way of live. This also has a very visible consequence on the livelihood of the Gabra as the majority of them are forced to give up pastoralism in favor of a destitute peri-urban life in Moyale.

References

Aalen, Lovise. 2006. 'Ethnic federalism and self-determination for nationalities in a semi-authoritarian state: the case of Ethiopia'. *International Journal of Minority and Group Rights*13 (2-3), pp. 243-261.

Aalen, Lovise and Tronvoll, Kjetil. 2009. The end of democracy? Curtailing political and civil rights in Ethiopia. In Review of African Political Economy, 36: 120, 193-207.

Abbink, Jon. 1997. 'Ethnicity and constitutionalism in the contemporary Ethiopia'. *Journal of African Law*, Vol. 41. No. 2 pp. 159-174.

Adano Wario R. and Witsenburg K. 2008. Pastoral sedentarisation, natural resource management, and livelihood diversification in Marsabit district, Northern Kenya. Lampter Credigion: The Edwin Mellen Press Ltd.

Assefa Fisseha. 2006. 'Theory versus practice in the implementation of ethnic federalism'. In David Turton (ed) Ethnic federalism, the Ethiopian experience in comparative perspective. Oxford: James Curry.

Aynalem Getachew. 2009. Inter-ethnic Relations: the case of Gumuz and Oromo in Kamashi and east Wollega Zones. MA Thesis, Department of Social Anthropology, Addis Ababa University.

Baylis, Elena A. 2004. 'Beyond rights: legal process and ethnic conflicts', in *Michigan journal of international law* 25, pp529-602.

Boku Tache. 2002. 'When the Commons are Individualized: An Exploration of Changing Resource Tenure Among Borana Oromo of Southern Ethiopia'. Paper prepared for Africa Dry Lands Workshop: Research Report to OSSREA.

Clapham, Chritopher. 2006. 'Afterword, ethnic federalism, the Ethiopian experience' In David Turton (ed) Ethnic federalism, the Ethiopian experience in comparative perspective. Oxford: James Curry.

Dawson Allan, Zanotti Laura and Vaccaro Ismael (eds). 2014. Negotiating Territoriality: Spatial dialogues between State and Tradition. New York: Routledge Tylor and Francis Group.

Dereje Feyissa. 2003. Ethnic groups and conflict, the case of Anyua-Nuer relations in the Gambela region, Ethiopia. PhD dissertation, Martin-Luther-university Halle-Wittenberg.

FDRE. 1995. Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia *Federal Negarit Gazeta* (2001) Proclamation No. 251/2001, No. 41. 6 July, 200.

Fekadu Adugna. 2009. Negotiating identity: Politics of identification among the Borana, Gabra and Garri around Oromo-Somali Boundary in Southern Ethiopia, PhD Dissertation, Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg .

_____. 2014. Overlapping nationalist projects and contested spaces: the case of Oromo-Somali borderlands in Southern Ethiopia: *Journal of East African Studies*, V. 5, No. 4, special edition Routledge.

Getel Joeg, Rottenburg Richard, and Calkins Sandra (eds). 2014. Disrupting territories: land commodification and conflict in Sudan. James Currey.

Hagmann, Tobias. 2007. Pastoral Conflict and Resource Management in Ethiopia's Somali Region. PhD Dissertation, Swiss Graduate School of Public Administration.

Hogg, Richard. 1990. An institutional approach to pastoral development: an example from Ethiopia. TLDP, www.blackwell synergy.com accessed on 21.09.08.

Hussein, Jema. 2002. "Competition Over Resource and Ethnic Conflict in Federal Ethiopia: The Case of Recent Guji - Gedeo Conflict". Research Report submitted to OSSREA.

James, Wendy et al. 2002. (eds) Remapping Ethiopia: socialism and after. Oxford: James Curry.

Pauswang Seigfried, Tronvoll Kjetil, and Aalen Lovise. 2002. Ethiopia since the derg, a decade of democratic pretension and performance. Zed books.

Schlee, Günther. 2006. Consultancy report on conflict prevention and transformation project (CPT) of GTZ/DIALOG.

Schlee, Günther. 2008a. The "Five Drums," Proto-Rendile-Somali, and Oromo nationalism: a response to Aneesa Kassam. In *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 55, 2, Spring 2008.

Schlee Günther. 2008b. Ethnopolitics and Gabra origin. Working Papers, No. 103: Max-Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.

Schlee, Günther and Abdullahi A. Shongolo. 1995. Local war and its impact on ethnic and religious identification in southern Ethiopia. *GeoJournal* 36 (1): 7- 17.

Smith, Lahra. 2007. Voting for an ethnic identity: procedural and institutional response to ethnic conflict in Ethiopia. In *Journal of Modern African Studies*. 45, 4 (2007) pp.565-594. Cambridge: Cambridge University press.

Turton, David. 2006. 'Introduction' In David Turton (ed) Ethnic federalism, the Ethiopian experience in comparative perspective. Oxford: James Curry.

Tronvoll, Kjetil. 2003. Identities in Conflicts, an Ethnography of War and Politics of Identities in Ethiopia 1998-2000. Unpublished PhD. Dissertation, University of Edinburgh.

Voughan, Sarah. 2003. Ethnicity and power in Ethiopia. PhD Dissertation, University of Edinburgh

Watson, Elithabeth. 2002. 'Capturing a local elite: the Konso honeymoon. In Wendy James et al (eds) Remapping Ethiopia, socialist and after'. Oxford: James Curry.

Wood, John C. 1997. 'Inside the outside: the construction of pastoral identities at the margins of Kenya and Ethiopia' In Katsuyoshi Fukui et al (eds.) Ethiopia in broader perspective, papers of the XIIIth international conference of Ethiopian studies. Kyoto 1997, Vol. II, 688-705.

_____. 2000. 'Symbolic Reversals among East Africa's Gabra and their Neighbors' In *Northeast African Studies* 7.3 (2000), 59-84.

Young, John. 1998. Regionalism and Democracy in Ethiopia. In *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Jun., 1998), pp. 191-204.

_____. 1996. Ethnicity and power in Ethiopia. In *Review of African Political Economy*, vol.23, 70, 531-542.